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ABSTRACT

Human capacity for language acquisition is not strictly compartmentalized, with one acquisitional mechanism for the native language and others totally unrelated to it; rather, it consists of a unified mechanism flexible enough to handle various differences in external settings. This learning system operates on the formal properties of the linguistic devices used in natural languages. The human language system contains cognitive capacities especially geared to acquisition of language structures, and it also has some of the general properties of other learning systems, such as developmental stages, reliance on prior knowledge, and the decomposition of complex phenomena for learning purposes. Aspects of second language acquisition such as language contact or conflict, loyalty or shift, intellectual advantages or disadvantages, attitudes, interference, borrowing, pidginization, and de-creolization can be studied profoundly only when general language acquisitional factors are considered. (MSE)

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LANGUAGE ACQUISITIONAL UNIVERSALS: L1, L2, PIDGINS, AND FLT

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How do human beings learn languages? What enables them to do so? Do they have a different and totally unrelated neuro-psychological mechanism for learning a first language (L1), another one for the second (L2), yet another one for learning a language in the classroom, as in foreign language teaching (FLT), and still others for every different situation in which an individual may acquire a language? The answer to these questions can only be no: There are infinitely many different situations. This would require infinitely many neuro-psychological mechanisms. This, in turn, would imply that the capacity of the human brain is infinite, which it clearly is not. Man's ability to learn languages must therefore be thought of as a finite learning system flexible enough to cope with different situations. Consequently, if a theory of language acquisition is not to be ad hoc and anecdotal, it must take as its domain all types of language acquisition, and it must state commonalities as well as differences between these types.

The main questions to ask are: First, are there any acquisitional regularities which are universal in the sense that they apply in all types of language acquisition irrespective of the variables that may be involved including the age of the learner? Second, are there any acquisitional regularities which are more restricted in that they apply only in some situations, with certain age groups, etc.? Third, to which extent do learners vary individually when acquiring the same language? Fourth, to which extent can the language learning abilities, particularly the neuro-psychological language processing abilities, be manipulated, as attempted, for example, in FLT? And fifth, what type of learning theory is required to describe language learning?

These questions are taken up below. They are central to a project that was designed to develop such an integrated view/theory of language acquisition. I shall first show how this comprehensive point of view fits into the main streams of previous research on language acquisition. Then I briefly describe our project. Next I summarize the main results concerning the five topics above.

The overall view to emerge is that man is endowed with neuro-psycholog-

ical processing abilities specifically geared to the processing of language/speech data. Some such abilities are applicable in all situations and in all age groups, others are more restricted in their applicability. No learning theory is presently available that adequately captures the empirically observable facts when humans learn languages.

Past research

In the past, research on language acquisition was centered on individual types. For example, the background to our project at Kiel was the research situation of the late 1960's. The activities were centered on L1 acquisition and on FLT. The former (ranging from, for example, Jakobson 1941 to Slobin 1970 and McNeill 1970) claimed that there were universal acquisitional regularities; the latter considered FLT as something totally unrelated to L1 because of the teaching situation (eg. Lane 1962). The first failed to determine how universal the alleged universals really are. It never occurred to these researchers to consider L2 acquisition, FLT, or other acquisitional types as worthy of consideration. On the other hand, researchers on FLT failed to see that a human being could not possibly have infinitely many acquisitional mechanisms, one for every new language situation a learner may find himself in. Worst of all, FLT researchers made no attempt to investigate empirically in which way FLT differed from learning a language outside the classroom.

The situation has improved during the early 1970's, due to the rise of research on naturalistic, ie. untutored L2 acquisition. (Surveys in McLaughlin 1978, Felix 1978.) Among other things, this research has, from its beginning, been concerned with the question as to which extent naturalistic L2 acquisition parallels L1 acquisition. L2 research has also always stressed its implications for FLT. It seems to me, however, that we have to advance further and consider all types of language acquisition and to check them all for differences and commonalities, if we are ever to arrive at satisfactory understanding of how human beings learn languages. This is the aim of our comprehensive project at Kiel.

A comprehensive project

The core of the project is a typology of acquisitional situations providing for monolingualism, bilingualism, etc; L1, L2, L3 ..., ie. non-simultaneous acquisition; language teaching vs. naturalistic, ie. untutored, acquisition; re-learning of languages; and others. We systematically trace

the acquisition of selected structural areas across these acquisitional types. We now have data on L1 German, L1 English, L2 German/ (acquired by speakers of) L1 English, naturalistic L2 English/L1 German, naturalistic re-learning of L2 English/L1 German, FLT L2 English/L1 German, and some pidgins. (For details on the design of this project see Mode 1974, 1978a, in prep.).

Methodologically we strictly insist on two points: On the one hand, we distinguish between the way linguistic structures are learned, ie. processed by the brain, and the level of proficiency achieved by a given learner. On the other hand, we are not satisfied with giving long lists of co-occurring variables. Instead, we insist on determining which variables control which property in the observable learner data.

Learning vs. learner proficiency

Consider two L2 learners who do not reach the same level of proficiency, ie. they do not progress equally far. This does not, so it seems to me, imply that their brains process language data in different ways. It is quite likely that both learners possess the same neuro-psychological processing mechanisms but that for various reasons other psychological mechanisms block their application.

Co-occurrence of variables

Many researchers insist on identifying every variable involved in a language learning situation to provide the fullest possible picture (for example, Oksaar 1977). This is of little help. Such lists state co-occurrences, but they do not tell us which variable determines what in the speech of the learner. The same is true for more sophisticated approaches which determine the statistical significance for these co-occurrences. But this still does not tell us what determines what. The issues concerning how the human brain processes language data for the purpose of acquisition are far too complex to be solved by correlation statistics.

Some results

I take the view that the characterization of any acquisitional type remains unsatisfactory unless it is shown how it differs from, or how it parallels, other types. For example, to say that some property is typical of L2 acquisition implies, by way of delimitation, that it does, or does not, occur in other types. Therefore, I shall first present three rather global

characteristics which seem to apply to all acquisitional types. They are, intended to serve two purposes: first, they present the major outlines of a comprehensive theory of language acquisition; second, these global characteristics serve as a frame of reference within which commonalities and differences can be stated between the types. I shall especially deal with what characterizes L2 acquisition.

Decomposition of target structures

Whatever the type of acquisition, target structures are not necessarily acquired all at once. Complex structural areas, eg. interrogation, or inflections, are first decomposed, as it were, into various elements which are later on re-integrated, step by step, into the target structure. This is reflected, among other things, in the errors observable in the production of language learners. The acquisitional types differ as to the degree of decomposition. It is highest for L1, less for naturalistic L2, and even less for FLT.

Developmental sequences

Since a language is not learned all at once, there must be some chronological order in the acquisition of the structures of a given language. The naturalistic types in contrast to the tutored ones, are marked by a much stricter chronological sequence in which the elements of a structural paradigm (eg. the interrogative pronouns) or a particular structure or structural area (such as negation, the vowel system) is acquired. Note that this includes the pre-targetlike developmental structures. As an illustration consider Table 1. It contrasts some early stages and developmental structures when English and German are involved in various combinations of L1 and/or naturalistic L2 acquisition. Note that some developmental structures, like III neg X or IV Subj neg VP occur in all four types, whereas the type IV Subj V neg X is restricted to L2 English/L1 German.

Strategies

Obviously, these global characteristics, although formulated in linguistic terminology, are the product of behavior on the part of the learner. They must result from learner strategies. To be more precise, they result from the language processing mechanisms of the human brain. That is, I assume that a characteristic like decomposition of target structures

Table 1. Early stages in some developmental sequences for the acquisition of negation (adapted from Mode 1976, 1977b).

(1) L1 German

- I nein
'no'
- II nein, Milch
'no, (I want) milk'
- III nein haum
'no bang (i.e. don't bang
on the table)'
- IV Heike nicht essen
'Heike not eat (i.e. doesn't eat)'
die nicht kaputt
'this not broken'

L2 German/L1 English

- I-II nein
'no'
nein, da
'no, (it is) there'
- III nein helfen
'no help (i.e. don't
help me)'
- IV Katze nein schlafen
'the cat no sleep'
Milch nicht da
'milk not there'

(2) L1 English

- I no
- II no, mum
- III no close
'don't close the door'
- IV Katherine no like celery

Katherine not quite through

L2 English/L1 German

- I-II no
no, you
- III no play baseball
'let's not play baseball'
- IV that's no good
lunch is no ready
no no close the window
'I'm not going to close
the window'
John go not to the school
John is not going to
school

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presents a set of strategies minutely geared to process the formal properties of linguistic devices. They are structure-specific in that it should require different strategies to handle, say phonology, word order, free or bound forms. Consequently, the global characteristics above remain rather uninformative unless these minute strategies are identified and unless the conditions of their applicability are made clear both in terms of the formal structures they operate on and in terms of the acquisitional type for which they are available. Consider the acquisition of free and bound forms, for example, English will: -'ll, have: -'ve, no/not: -n't. A survey of L1, naturalistic L2, and FLT L2 English/L1 German has shown that free forms are produced productively before the bound forms in these three acquisitional types (Mode 1979). This raises the question to which extent such strategies are universal or restricted to some type(s) and/or age groups; and to which extent they allow for individual variation.

Universals

Consider a special case of the free vs. bound form strategy, as manifested, in the two negation types neg X...X neg and Subj neg VP. I have traced them through various acquisitional types, including pidgins and creoles. A sample of the evidence is summarized in Table 2.

The strategy concerning free vs. bound forms predicts that the bound forms should be later than no/not, or the free form equivalents of other languages. Since pidgins were included in the survey, it was impossible to determine the sequencing in every case. Yet the strategy would still predict that the two negation types should at least occur. Table 2 fully confirms these predictions. Moreover, since the subjects in this survey include age ranges up to 60 and above, it follows that these negation structures are due to some universal, non-age dependent strategy. But, of course, there is no reason to assume that all other strategies are universal in the same way. Reliance on L1, for example, is restricted to L2 acquisition.

Reliance on prior language knowledge

That L2 learners draw on their L1 is by no means novel. It is most important, therefore, to note the nature of their reliance on L1. First, it is not a developmental mistake, but an integral part of L2 acquisition. Learners, in spite of recent suggestions to the contrary by Dulay and Burt 1974a-c, approach the L2 through the grid of their previous language expe-

Table 2. Negation structures neg X, X neg and Subj neg VP in various types of language acquisition, including pidgins and early creoles (from Mode, *in press*)

Acquisitional type	neg X	Negation type X neg	Subj neg VP
<u>L1 monolingualism</u>			
English (Bloom 1970)	no close		I no want envelope
German (Mode 1977a)	nein schaff ich 'no manage I'	Kaffee nein 'coffee no'	Katze nein schlafen 'cat no sleep'
Swedish (Lange/Larsson 1973)	nej kossa 'no cow'		Embla inte ha täcket 'Embla not have quilt'
Latvian (Mode/Ruke-Dravins 1977)	nē minimī 'no pencil'	gib nē 'will no'	ipupu nē ūta 'bath no go'
<u>Naturalistic L2 acquisition</u>			
L2 English/German (Mode 1976)	no play baseball		me no close the window
L2 English/Spanish (Schumann 1975)	no like coffee '(I) don't like coffee'		I no can see 'I can't see'
L2 English/Japanese (Hilton 1974)	no my turn		me no win
L2 German/English (Felix 1978)	nein meine 'no mine'		ich nein hat eins 'I no have one'
<u>Re-learning L2</u>			
L2 English/German (Mode, unpublished data)	no sit here 'don't sit here'		I no want to play 'I don't want to play'
<u>Pidgin</u>			
Exondo Populaire (Todd 1974)	ke bo 'don't go'		me ke bo 'I don't do'
Freetown Krio (Todd 1974)	nɔ du 'don't do'		a nɔ du 'I don't do'
Hawaiian Pidgin (Carr 1972)	my father, no take care me 'my father, (he) didn't take care of me'		baby name, me no like 'I don't like my baby name'

rience. Reliance on L1 is not random, but systematic. Learners draw on their L1 only at specific points in their L2 developments. Crucial prerequisites within the L2 development have to be met before reliance on L1 can take place at all. (Discusses these arguments and on the four characteristics in Mode 1977b, 1978b-c.)

Individual variation

Research on language acquisition has largely neglected the study of individual variation among learners. Of course, it is well known that onset of acquisition, speed, fluency, and the like, may vary drastically. Less is known about structural variation, i.e. individual variations within the developmental sequences in terms of variations among the linguistic structures used by the learner, including his pre-targetlike errors. Such variations occur in all acquisitional types. But they seem to be much greater in FLT than in either L1 or naturalistic L2 acquisition. These variations are not infinite. Their range is limited to the acquisitional type(s) and the target structure(s).

To give an example, I return to the free vs. bound form strategy. Suppose a learner of English has learned both no and not. The free vs. bound form strategy allows him to use either one. This is exactly what we found in our data on L2 English/L1 German, for example, in the Subj neg VP structure. The type Subj not VP occurred, and so did Subj no VP. Both structures may be found with one speaker; other learners may prefer one over the other. It seems, that this type of structural variation results from the structure of the language processing strategies of the human brain.

FLT

As pointed out above, one difference between FLT and naturalistic L2 acquisition is the lack of chronologically ordered developmental sequences in FLT. However, this does not mean that both types are totally unrelated, because despite this difference the error types are much the same. This means that man's natural processing abilities also operate in FLT. More than that, there is evidence to suggest that these abilities can only be manipulated to some extent, because they recur even in schoolroom drills conducted to avoid them. Consider this utterance: doesn't John go home. It was one among many like in our FLT data. Such utterances occurred while negation was being learned/practised. They are not intended as interrogatives, but as negated statements. They cannot be explained by teaching

methodology, nor by L1 reliance. Rather, such utterances are due to the free vs. bound form strategy, with doesn't being used as a free form. The word order is that of the type neg X, familiar from naturalistic L2 (cf. Table 1).

Conclusion

Man's capacity for language acquisition is not strictly compartmentalized such that there is one acquisitional mechanism for L1, another totally unrelated to the first one for L2, and so on. Rather, man seems to be invested with a unified mechanism flexible enough to handle various differences in the external settings. This learning system operates on the formal properties of the linguistic devices used in natural languages. On the one hand, man's language learning system constitutes a special type of cognitive capacities which are especially geared to the acquisition of language structures. The details of these capacities cannot be equated with cognitive concepts, the development of logical thinking, of perception, of pragmatics, or how to handle the complexities of social interaction, and the like. On the other hand, man's language learning system seems to agree with at least some of the general properties of other learning systems. For instance, the notion of developmental sequences including individual variation, recurs elsewhere in the maturational development of human beings. So does reliance on prior knowledge and the decomposition of complex phenomena for the purposes of learning.

As for L2 acquisition, whether one looks at the various types of L2 bilingualism in terms of language contact or conflict, loyalty or shift, intellectual advantages or disadvantages, or in terms of puristic attitudes, interference, borrowing, pidginization and de-creolization, all these issues, it seems to me, cannot be studied in any really profound way unless the language acquisitional aspects are given due consideration. All these phenomena, one way or another, fall within the range of L2 acquisitional regularities.

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